

## **‘TWO ENGINES UPON THE IMPROVED PRINCIPLE’: MALPAS FIRE SERVICE 1831 TO 1998**

### **Early days**

It is appropriate that the old Malpas Fire Station in the High Street stands on the line of the former Roman road from Chester to London. It was the Romans who first introduced the idea of public firefighters, using bands of slaves for the purpose. Then, after a disastrous fire which destroyed about a quarter of all Rome in 6AD, they set up a well organised ‘Corps of Vigiles’ (i.e. watchmen).

Many cities and towns, such as Winchester, Worcester, Bath, Lincoln and York, were devastated by great fires during the twelfth century. The first Great Fire of London was in 1212 and was probably as devastating as the better known Great Fire of 1666. The first fire insurance companies were formed in the 1680s and all of them operated their own fire brigades. Contrary to popular belief, they would put out fires in premises not insured with them, particularly if they were neighbours to premises which were. They would also attend fires at the houses of poor people, for the good name it would earn the company.

During the sixteenth century a system known as *King’s Briefs* or *Fire Briefs* was introduced. The system required a time to be set aside during the communion service in every parish church, for the reading of the briefs. These briefs, circulated to all churches, were in fact notices of public appeals for assistance to those who had suffered by fire. This explains why in 1729 Malpas church donated one shilling towards the collection for ‘*a man who had a loss by fire from Heaven [a thunderbolt?] in ye County of Stafford in ye Town of Westen*’.

In 1707 an Act of Parliament was passed, placing the responsibility for fire prevention and control in London parishes in the hands of the churchwardens of the parish churches. Besides providing fire engines they also had to provide stopcocks working from the public water supply, where such a supply existed. Chester had already bought its first fire engines two years earlier, in 1705. By 1762 the city employed a brigade of 32 firemen. In 1845 this was combined into a joint police-fire brigade, which lasted until the formation of the Earl of Chester’s Volunteer Fire Brigade in 1870. The Malpas fire service was administered by seven different bodies, from the time when the first fire engines were purchased in 1831 until the opening of the present fire station in 2000.

### **1. 1831-1894: MALPAS VESTRY/TOWN MEETING**

Before Malpas Parish Council was formed, following the 1894 Local Government Act, the affairs of the town were controlled by the local ratepayers who met together as the *Town* or *Vestry* meeting. In those days the rates were collected by the church, for such purposes as maintaining the roads, relieving the poor and keeping law and order. The ratepayers’ meeting was also under the control of the church and one of the two Malpas Rectors

was Chairman, by right. Records of early Vestry meetings (which were originally held in the church vestry) can be found in the Malpas Churchwardens Account Books, which survive from 1692.

A major step forward in helping to provide public fire services was taken in 1830, with the passing of An Act to make Provision for the Lighting and Watching of Parishes in England and Wales, usually known as the *Lighting and Watching Act* for short.

This Act gave local authorities, such as vestry meetings, the powers (but not the obligation) to raise a local rate for the purposes of financing fire protection provision. It was this act which gave the authority for Malpas to take a major step forward the following year.

The first surviving separate minute book for the Malpas Vestry Meeting, entitled Minute Book of the Meeting of the Ratepayers of the Township and Town of Malpas, starts in 1831. The Meeting was responsible for undertaking or supporting many improvements to the town, including laying the first sewers, improvement of the water supply and introduction of gas lighting for the streets.

Among the minutes of the first meeting of Malpas Vestry (or Town Meeting), on 9 January 1831, there is a copy of a letter in which the ratepayers of the Parish of Malpas requested the churchwardens to call a meeting of the parish *for the purpose of taking into consideration the best method of supplying Engines for the use of the Parish*. This shows that the churchwardens had a number of 'civil' duties in addition to their work in looking after the church's affairs and its building.

No time was wasted and the meeting of the parish was called for 18 January. At that meeting it was agreed to place an order with Messrs Tilley & Company, of Blackfriars Road in London, for *'2 Engines of the Second Class of twelve men power upon the improved principle, with six lengths of improved pipe ... One dozen of leather buckets at £5.20s.0d per dozen for each Engine. The Engines to be upon Block Wheels'*. Mr Tilley himself acknowledged the order, in a letter dated 21 January. His letter suggested certain modifications, including steering gear due to *'the inconvenience of moving engines on the Roads made only to run in a straight direction, also the probability of their being thrown over in turning corners as they must be lifted round'*, and cast iron spoke wheels, since *'the former are more durable and are not liable to get oval as those of wood are'*.

Although the cost of the engines would have to be met mainly from the parish rates it was decided also to invite subscriptions from all the local landowners, with the exception of Lord Cholmondeley. A circular letter was sent to them, requesting *'Aid and Generosity ... on this Occasion'*. Some of the letters received in reply to this appeal are still preserved in the parish church records, including those from Sir Philip Grey Egerton at Oulton Park, Lord Kenyon and Sir John Hanmer.

Sir Philip Grey Egerton questioned the need for new engines, since a number of local landowners, including Lord Cholmondeley, already had their own private fire appliances for use on their estates. Other landowners were

dubious about the likely effectiveness of just two engines based in such a large parish. However, all of them agreed to subscribe. It would be interesting to know what became of Lord Cholmondeley's engine, and how effective it was, in view of the later formation of the Cholmondeley Fire Brigade in 1897 – using a former Malpas engine!

Encouraged by the response, the churchwardens then wrote to Lord Cholmondeley, to let him know that *“several replies have been received expressing an interest to subscribe.....may we take the liberty of requesting the name of your lordship at the head of the list, mentioning any donation your lordship may be pleased to contribute.”*

A revised order, agreeing to the recommended modifications, was quickly despatched to Tilley & Company. They were requested to deliver the engines to Wheelock Wharf near Sandbach, from where they would be brought by road to Malpas. The churchwardens' accounts tell us that the two fire engines cost £158.19s.0d (£158.95). Transport charges were £4.13s.0d (£4.65) for the canal journey and £1.19s.5d (£1.97) paid to *“Mr Phillips for carriage of the Engines from Wheelock.”*

It was agreed that the engines should be based at Malpas and the Broxton Inn (now called the Egerton Arms). Mr Joseph Huxley, the Malpas builder, was paid a total of £7.5s.9d (£7.29) for some work on the engines and for building the Malpas engine house. Mr Richard Bourne was paid (£9.14s.0d (£9.70) for building the Broxton engine house and for other expenses. Mr Jones, a local painter, was paid 4s.6d (22.5p) for lettering the buckets with the parish name.

The engines were horse drawn and had to be pumped manually, by men working a long pump bar which ran the length of the engine. This explains the specification *“of twelve men power”* in the original order for the engines. The men would either go out with the engine or be recruited at the scene of the fire, being paid in either cash or beer. The parish did not have its own horses but would hire them for each call. For instance, the churchwardens paid Mr Peach [licensee of the Lion Inn?] £1.2s.6d (£1.23) *“for taking the Fire Engines towards the Fens [Fenns Moss?] when there was an alarm of fire in that neighbourhood.”* Parish ratepayers received a free service but householders outside the parish had to pay, such as a Mr G Walmsley of Tattenhall who was charged £1.0s.0d (£1.00), presumably for the services of the Broxton engine. From 1831 onwards the churchwardens made regular annual payments of £3.0s.0s (£3.00) each to Joseph Huxley and Richard Bourne for looking after the engines.

The engines appear to have been heavily used with the result that in 1834 the Vestry meeting was asked to approve expenditure on new wheels and axles for the Malpas engine. This also seems to be when some sort of uniform was first provided: *“... flannel dresses [uniforms] to be provided for each engineer.”*

The Vestry/Town Meeting minute book tells us little more about the parish fire service after 1834. Some information can be found in the columns of the Chester Chronicle and the Whitchurch Herald. To hunt through all the papers for the period 1831-1895 would be a huge task, since the newspapers are not

indexed. However, some references which I have come across suggest that the engines were used mainly to attend house and farm fires, as one would expect. Typical calls were to Bank Farm at Higher Wych (May 1880), when the fire was eventually extinguished but only the gable walls and chimney of the house was left standing; and minor fires at Mr Battarbee's malt kiln and Wycherley's saddler's shop (both January 1881). There was a serious fire at John Huxley's tailor's shop in Church Street in January 1887, when "*a mass of flames completely enveloped the structure.*" Among the goods destroyed was "*a sewing machine just new.*" The problem here was that the public water supply was turned off every night, to save water. The supply was pumped up from the Goodmoors, south-east of the town, to a reservoir in the old Castle Hill by Saint Oswald's church, from where it was re-distributed to some private houses and to public standpipes. This system had originally been financed jointly by two local landowners, Lord Cholmondeley and Mr Drake, in the 1830s. In the case of Huxley's fire "*it was only through the kindness of neighbours in offering their supply of rain water, which was plentiful, and was obtained without delay, that the further spread was prevented.*"

By 1890 the residents of Malpas were becoming very concerned about the apparent inefficiency of the parish fire service. Pressure was put on the Churchwardens, who still had responsibility for the two engines. The wardens finally called a public meeting in the recently built (1897) Jubilee Hall, in April 1890. The advertised purpose of the meeting was "*to consider the present condition and state of efficiency of the fire engine, with a view to its re-organisation, and the forming of a fire brigade for Malpas and district.*" At the meeting it was revealed that the operation of the existing engine was in debt to the tune of £34.19s.3d (£34.96). One of the main problems in recent years had been the difficulty of finding men to go out with the engine, since there was no organised permanent brigade. In the words of Mr W P Huxley, who had day-to-day care of the Malpas engine, "*in cases of emergency, what was everyone's business appeared to be no body's business.*"

The meeting agreed that a local rate could be levied by the Churchwardens to support the service, since Malpas had adopted the 1830 Lighting and Watching Act. The Chairman of the meeting, Mr St John Charlton (agent to the Cholmondeley Estate), referred to the prevailing good public spirit in Malpas at the time and which "*was so marked at the Jubilee (1887) by the erection of such a beautiful hall, they would not at the present allow it to go unprotected from destruction by fire.*"

A committee was appointed to inspect both the Malpas and the Broxton engines. In this they were assisted by a Mr Edwards "who had been instrumental in the recent organisation of the Fire Brigade at Farndon." A further public meeting was held a fortnight after the first, when Mr Edwards brought the Farndon brigade to Malpas "*who rode through the town on their engine. Being dressed in their new uniforms – about 14 in number – and with the engine newly painted, they presented an animated appearance as they passed through to the Jubilee Hall, where the horses were taken out and the engine unmanned.*" Mr Edwards offered, should a new Malpas brigade be formed, to "*come over to Malpas and show the Brigade ... the proper working of the engine and the engine drill.*"

It appears that Farndon had actually acquired its fire engine in 1868, a horse-drawn vehicle known locally as 'The Old Watering Pot'. It was housed in the old village lock-up, built in 1837 and still standing. The engine was finally sold in 1896, apparently because it was considered no longer necessary due to the availability of motor driven engines at Wrexham and Malpas [could this be true? Were motor driven engines available at this early date? The information comes from Farndon – the history of a Cheshire Village, published in 1981].

The report on the two existing engines was that, although they were nearly 60 years old, they were both still in reasonable condition. However, the Malpas engine was not powerful enough for the town, since it could not throw water to the tops of the higher houses. It was agreed that the Broxton engine should continue in use but that a new engine should be purchased for Malpas and a brigade be organised. The existing Malpas engine could then be re-located to Bickley or Cholmondeley.

No immediate action appears to have followed this meeting. An item in the Whitchurch Herald the following September reports that the engines from Farndon and Malpas extinguished a hay fire at Horton. It was not until the next year that perhaps the most spectacular fire attended by the original Malpas engine occurred, in Malpas itself.

The Wesleyan Methodist Chapel had been built in 1874 where *Chapel Rise* now stands in Old Hall Street. About half-past three on a Sunday afternoon in January 1891 "*when most people in the quiet little town of Malpas were taking their Sabbath rest*", the central heating apparatus in the chapel overheated. Because the weather had been so cold the boiler had been stoked particularly well after the morning service. The pipes overheated, the floor was set alight and the fire was not noticed until the flames had nearly reached the roof. All the fire brigade could do was to damp down the smouldering remains. Undaunted, the Wesleyans set to raising funds and in March the following year opened a new chapel on the same site. This chapel survived until recently, when it was demolished to make way for Chapel Rise.

## **2. 1895-1930: MALPAS PARISH COUNCIL**

Whether the Malpas fire engine and the brigade survived right until the formation of Malpas Parish Council in December 1894 is not clear. What is known is that the Broxton engine was taken over by the newly formed Broxton Parish Council early in 1895. They moved it from the Egerton Arms to a new fire engine house which they built on the Old Coach Road. This still stands, opposite the entrance to Frogg Manor Hotel, and bears the inscription 'BFB [Broxton Fire Brigade] 1895' over the door. The engine house still belongs to the Parish Council and is let to a private resident for domestic purposes. The Broxton engine had not been so heavily used as the Malpas engine and was probably in a better state. It went out occasionally, mainly to farm fires. There do not appear to have been any regular firemen and it may be that the victims of fires had to come to fetch the engine and operate it themselves, making a payment for its use. In 1925 the Parish Council formed a Broxton Fire Brigade Committee, comprising five members, and accepted the offer of

the Broxton Sports Committee to donate the proceeds of their sports (£95.3s.0d = £95.15) to the upkeep of the engine. In 1932 it was decided to dispose of the engine and to transfer the balance of £39.18s.9d (£39.94) in the fire engine account to the Parish Council's general account. The engine was sold to the Bolesworth Estate for a minimum of £7.10s.0d (£7.50) and the engine shed was let for an annual rent of £2.12s.0d (£2.60). Recent enquiries to the Bolesworth Estate office suggest that the engine no longer exists.

Returning to Malpas, the Parish Council there very quickly decided to exercise its powers to adopt the 1830 Lighting and Watching Act and to establish itself as a local fire authority. A public meeting was called in February 1895 "*for the purpose of raising funds by voluntary means to provide a fire engine.*" Eventually, after turning down the offer of a second-hand fire engine for £72.10s.0d (£72.50), plus £25 for hose and pipe, a new engine was ordered in December 1895.

In May of the following year the Malpas Parish Council Fire Engine Committee was formed, comprised of six of the eleven parish councillors. They agreed to accept the fire engine from the voluntary fund-raising committee "*subject to its being handed over to the Council free of cost.*" They also advertised for recruits for a volunteer fire brigade, to which the Jubilee Hall Management Committee submitted a list of 25 potential recruits. The new engine had actually arrived at the end of February, just too late to tackle a fire at Nomansheath "*which completely destroyed the farm buildings of Mr John Faulkner.*"

Malpas Parish Council took over full responsibility for the new engine in June 1896. This was the earliest Malpas fire engine for which a photograph survives. The picture shows the return of the engine to Malpas in 1902 from Whitchurch Railway Station, where it had been to collect three Malpas members of the Cheshire Yeomanry who had come back from fighting in the South African war.

The twelve-strong voluntary brigade was formed the same month (June 1896), comprising Captain Albert Eaton, Lieutenant John Huxley, Sergeant Leonard Fletcher, Corporal Edwin Williams and Privates A Hughes, W Farral, J Edwards, W Lythgoe, W Carter, A Fletcher, J Baker and W Fletcher.

Although the brigade was voluntary it does seem that they were paid a fee for attendance at fires, drills and practices, in a similar manner to our present 'retained' brigade. The charges to those whose fires were attended were:

Horses	£2.2s.0d (£2.10)	Corporal	6s.0d (30p)
Captain	10s.0d (50p)	Firemen	5s.0d (25p) each
Lieutenant	7s.6d (38p)	Pumpers	1s.0d (5p) per hour
Sergeant	6s.0d (30p)		(at Captain's discretion)

Mr Hesketh, who ran a confectionery and outside catering business from a shop at Malpas Cross, was contracted to provide horses for the engine. The Parish Council provided traces and harness. A site for an engine house next to the Wesleyan Chapel in Old Hall Street was inspected but this was eventually rejected in favour of a site by the Jubilee Hall in the High Street. By June 1897 the engine house had been built at a cost of £25, paid out of

the rents of the Moss Lands, which were collected by the Parish Council, as they still are today. The wooden building was sited at the end of the drive alongside the Jubilee Hall, which now gives access to the Hall's rear car park. Underneath one of the side windows of the hall, by the drive, can still be seen the brickwork filling the space where the key to the engine house was once kept behind a glass panel. When the fire alarm was raised the first person to arrive at the engine house would smash the glass and open the doors, ready for the horses to be hitched up. The horses were summoned by a bugle, which hung [where?].

There are two stories connected with that bugle, which is still preserved in the modern fire station. In June 1915 a recruiting meeting for the army was held in Malpas, on a Sunday, Just as residents were returning from their various places of worship a rallying bugle call, given by a boy scout from Crewe, rang through the town and was mistaken by many as the call of the Fire Brigade. People gathered round The Cross, expecting to see the brigade turn out! Better known is the story of the rag and bone man who came to town with his bugle to attract the attention of the residents. The firemen ran from their work or houses to find that there was no fire! The unfortunate rag and bone man was taken before the Broxton magistrates and fined ten shillings (50 pence) for disturbing the peace.

Both the engine house and the bugle were damaged by high spirited revellers on the night of the Hunt Ball in the Jubilee Hall, in early 1898. Mr Baker, the Hunt's representative, was sent bills of 2s.6d. (12.5p) each for cleaning the engine house and repairing the bugle, and 1s.6d (7.5p) for gas used in the engine house.

Local tailors were invited to tender for the supply of fire brigade uniforms. A quotation of £2.2s.3d (£2.11) for each uniform was accepted from George Morgan "*draper, milliner, dress maker, tailor and outfitter*" of Church Street (his business was later moved to what is now Huxley's shop, in the High Street). It was also agreed to purchase 12 helmets and 9 axes at a total cost of £10.

The history of the Malpas brigade from the end of the nineteenth century until 1930 is well chronicled in the minutes of Malpas Parish Council. The brigade had its ups and downs but, certainly in its early days, the members seemed determined to establish themselves as an enthusiastic and efficient force. This was helped by their participation in demonstrations and competitions. For instance, in April 1901 the Parish Council gave them permission to take the engine to Bettisfield Park for a demonstration [an Easter carnival?]. Later that year and again in 1902 they were given permission to take part in Chester Carnival.

A further opportunity for the Malpas brigade to demonstrate its efficiency arose that same year, when its members took part in a sports day on the Ox Heyes. This was part of the celebrations to mark the Coronation of King Edward VII. The programme for the sports included a Fireman's Race: "*Run 50 yards, put on Tunic, Cap, Belt, and Axe correctly and return.*"

From 1903 to 1910 there appear to have been 'personnel' problems, including poor attendance at brigade drills and the resignation of Captain Eaton in

1906. He later withdrew his resignation but resigned permanently in 1910 because "*he had not time to attend to his duties.*" By May of that year the brigade officers were Captain J Baker, Lieutenant J Edwards, Sergeant William Wragg and Corporal T Powell. The brigade's funds were running low and so, in August 1910, the gentry, farmers and property owners within four miles of Malpas were asked to make a contribution. In October the popular local physician Doctor Paulin accepted an invitation to become brigade president.

In 1912 Malpas was one of the brigades which attended the catastrophic fire at Carden Hall, which completely destroyed the old timber framed building. Malpas were there from the morning of Monday 16 September until the evening of the following day. Their total bill for attending the fire was £41.14s.9d (£41.74).

Two years later, and a month before the outbreak of the first World War, the brigade had to deal with "*undoubtedly the most disastrous fire ever in Malpas.*" The fire caused damage estimated at £10,000, destroying the workshops, sheds and timber stores of T G Huxley and Company, at the builder's yard in Old Hall Street. The fire broke out about 6 pm on Tuesday 14 July. It was attended by the Malpas, Cholmondeley, Whitchurch Town and Whitchurch Volunteer brigades. Many people turned out to assist, since there was a very real danger that the fire might spread throughout the town and Malpas would go down in history with its own 'Great Fire'. The vivid newspaper reports refer to "*a remarkable feature in the quelling of the outbreak ... the great activity and daring of the women who, despite the orders of the police, rushed into the work of removing goods and chattels from the houses ... while some of the women took to pumping when the men were absent.*" A group of tennis players on a nearby court threw down their racquets and, still in their tennis clothes (long skirts for the ladies in those days!) "*played the game with a will.*" Canon Armitstead, the Rector, "*bareheaded and divested of all superfluous impediments in the way of clothing worked throughout like a Trojan...*" The editor of the Whitchurch Herald, in the following Saturday's edition, wrote: "*It would seem that it was only by the direct intervention of Providence, aided by the united endeavours of all in the vicinity, that Malpas was not razed to the ground.*"

Following the outbreak of war in August 1914 the brigade started to lose men as they volunteered for service in the armed forces. Replacements proved hard to find. In February 1916 the Parish Council minutes record the arrangements to be made if an air raid was expected: "*The Fire Brigade to be called and assemble at the Engine House and to be under the control of the Police until the Military came on the scene, then to be under them.*"

It is an interesting comment on the relative effectiveness of communications then and now that, in 1917, the Parish Council agreed that "*in case of a fire taking place and there was not sufficient muster any member of the Council or any officer of the Brigade may wire to any member of the Brigade to call him to the fire, who was in reasonable distance so that he would get to the fire to be of service.*" This was in the days when rural post offices closed at 6 pm. How easily could one send a telegram nowadays?

At this time the brigade was using horses belonging to Mr Sam Bradley. He was the coal merchant and omnibus proprietor, based at Malpas railway



station in Hampton, who ran a shuttle service for train passengers between the station and the town. When the fire alarm was raised a Mr Edge had to cycle hell-for-leather to Hampton to summon the horses. After a delay in reaching a fire at Bulkeley in 1919 *"it was explained that Edge who was to cycle for the horses was bad [i.e. ill] and could not go and there was delay in getting someone else ..."* It was decided to have a telephone installed in Hampton to avoid any such problem in the future.

After further complaints, including one from the local branch of the Farmers' Union, about delays in the engine reaching fires it was decided, in early 1922, to investigate the possibility of towing the engine with a motor vehicle. The investigation dragged on, with one suggested solution after another being turned down, including the possibility of buying a completely new Shand & Mason or Dennis motor driven engine. However, funds were still low. In 1922 the Malpas Women's Institute was asked to arrange a whist drive to raise money towards new uniforms. Also it was agreed, as an economy measure, that those who required the attendance of the engine would have to supply their own horses! The problems over towing the engine had still not been solved by 1928, when Councillor Mercer asked, on behalf of the Fire Brigade Committee, whether *"some better method could be devised for towing the Fire Engine as the existing rope seemed dangerous"*!

It was around this time that the records start to show an increasing number of calls to motor vehicle incidents. For instance, in April 1928 the brigade was called out to a Ford lorry which had caught fire near Macefen smithy.

Finally the Parish Council really got into serious financial difficulties over the operation of the brigade. The main reason for this was the refusal of some insurance companies to re-imburse the bill for attendance at fires. In some cases, the insurers argued, those who were being charged were Malpas ratepayers and therefore entitled to a free service. The Council had difficulty in obtaining payment for a fire at Spring Vale Manure Works (later known as 'Logan's') in Greenway Lane, in September 1929. There were similar problems over fires at Stretton Hall and Cherry Hill, the bill for attendance at the latter totalling £28.15s.10d (£28.79). From the following year the brigade was fast heading towards bankruptcy.

In April 1930 an emergency meeting of the Parish Council was called to discuss the deteriorating situation. After long discussions the Clerk was instructed to write to the Clerk of Malpas Rural District Council: *"I am instructed by my Council to ask you to inform the Malpas Rural District Council at their next meeting that in view of the cost of maintaining the Malpas Fire Engine and of the difficulty of enforcing payment for its use my Council has decided to disband their Brigade. My Council will be glad to know if the Malpas Rural District Council are prepared to take over their engine and, if so, on what terms they would propose to do so."*

The Rural District Council agreed to take over the fire engine, provided that it was handed over free of charge. They then set up a new Joint Fire Brigade Committee, which included Councillors Hesketh, Mercer, Crowther and Chesworth as representatives of Malpas Parish Council.

Eight years later the 1938 Fire Brigades Act set up a total of 1,600 separate brigades in Great Britain, ranging in size from the enormous London Metropolitan Fire Brigade to small district council run units such as Malpas. The Act, although it made it compulsory for local authorities to provide fire services, also abolished Parish Councils as Fire Brigade authorities.

### **3. 1930-1941: MALPAS RURAL DISTRICT COUNCIL**

Malpas Rural District Council, like Malpas Parish Council, had been set up under the 1894 Local Government Act, which established Rural District and Parish Councils for the first time. It served a fairly extensive area, comprising the civil parishes (formerly known as *townships*) of Agden, Bickley, Bradley, Chidlow, Chorlton, Cuddington, Duckington, Edge, Hampton, Larkton, Macefen, Malpas, Newton, Oldcastle, Overton, Stockton, Threapwood, Tushingam, Wigland and Wychough.

The new Fire Brigade Committee set to work to examine the state of the existing engine and equipment. The 34-year-old engine and its couplings had suffered badly from excessive vibration, now that it was towed by motor lorries rather than horses. There were further difficulties because the lorries used were not covered by their owners' insurance policies while they were hauling the engine. Much of the old equipment and the uniforms needed replacing and additional equipment, including an extension ladder, was required to bring the brigade up to date with modern standards. Finally, in 1932, it was agreed that "*the fire engine is worn out and cannot be made efficient*" and that it would be better to raise funds for a new engine rather than to continue to spend money on the old vehicle and equipment.

By December 1933 the new engine was under construction. The Brigade was about to enter a new era and, in recognition of this, the Rural District Council agreed to affiliate it to the National Fire Brigade Association (annual subscription £1.10s.0d = £1.50!). Captain Mills organised a whist drive and dance, which raised over £32 for new uniforms and equipment, including leather helmets to replace the old [brass?] ones.

A new engine meant a new fire station, since the new vehicle was too wide for the side drive of the Jubilee Hall! And so, on 18 August 1934, the new station in Malpas High Street was officially opened by Mrs Rimmer, who lived at The Bolling in Church Street. At the same time, negotiations with Liverpool Corporation, whose water supply from Lake Vyrnwy ran through Malpas, resulted in improvement of pressure to the fire hydrants in the town, fed from the reservoir in the Castle Hill.

### **4. 1936-1941: TARVIN RURAL DISTRICT COUNCIL**

Malpas Rural District Council continued to run the fire service, with a retained brigade, until in 1936 it was absorbed into the larger Tarvin Rural District Council. A new Fire Brigade Committee was appointed by Tarvin RDC and some of the minutes of this committee survive, covering the period July 1938 to January 1939. The committee authorised the Malpas Brigade Captain, Arthur Hughes, to purchase further equipment. They also undertook the re-

painting of the fire station and installed electric dryers for the firemen's clothing.

## **5. 1941-1947: THE NATIONAL FIRE SERVICE**

Tarvin Rural District Council continued to manage the Malpas Brigade through the outbreak of the second World War in 1939. However, under the Fire Services (Emergency Provisions) Act of 1941, all fire services in the country were amalgamated into the new National Fire Service. The Service was divided into 39 Fire Areas in England and Scotland, under 12 Regional Officers.

Malpas came under Sub-area 'C', for which the headquarters was at the former Chester fire station in Northgate Street. Sub-area 'C' was answerable in turn to the Area HQ Commander based in Liverpool.

Because this was a National Service, its records are not available locally. The wartime local newspapers are not likely to be a profitable source of information either, due to wartime censorship restrictions on reporting. They may be worth investigating for the period 1945-1947, after hostilities had ceased, but the best source of information will be the memories of former members of the Brigade.

## **6. 1947-1998: CHESHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

The Fire Services Act 1947 handed over control of all fire services across the country from the National Fire Service to either County Councils or County Borough Councils. Therefore Malpas became part of the new Cheshire County Council Fire Service, with its headquarters in Chester.

Some of the early records of the County Council Fire Service are available (in a very dusty state!) in the Cheshire Record Office. The National Fire Service had introduced standard report forms for all incidents attended by fire crews and the new County Council Service continued with this system. In fact, the earliest report forms available, for early 1948, are re-used NFS forms altered to 'Cheshire County Fire Service'. The report forms show that the Malpas brigade was attending the usual variety of incidents that they attend today, except that horrific road traffic accidents were uncommon. For instance, in 1948 they attended bracken fires on Bickerton Hill, one caused by Army cadets using incendiary ammunition; a chimney fire in Old Hall Street; a Dutch barn fire at Bickley Wood farm; lorry fires on the A41 trunk road on two consecutive days; and they pumped water to help out a farmer at Farndon, whose cattle pit had run dry. One of their more unusual call-outs was to a burning hollow tree, which had been set alight by hay and straw used to smoke rats out of the tree!

Also of interest are the five volumes of County Headquarters logbooks for 1949. These record in detail every telephone call, every shift change, every movement of headquarters personnel, and every movement of every brigade in Cheshire, with a note of the actions being undertaken. Malpas came under District 'D', its station designation being 'D5'. Typical of the entries involving Malpas are:

5 July 1949

- 14.45 Fire at Hill Cottage near Bickerton Church. D5 attending.  
 14.48 C5 [Nantwich] to above.  
 14.57 Station Officer Shaw [HQ] left for above.  
 15.41 Picket [?] Hill, Bickerton – area of bracken in plantation well alight.  
 19.11 D5 returned from fire at Bickerton Hill.

10 July 1949

- 15.33 D4 [Tarporley] to fire at Beeston Towers [now 'The Wild Boar']  
 15.34 D5 to join above.  
 16.31 D5 returned from above.

All of this was, of course, monitored by telephone land line, before the days of radio communication and mobile phones.

The 1972 Local Government Act led to a further re-organisation within Cheshire, including the amalgamation of the former independent Chester County Borough Council into the new Cheshire County Council. A Fire Brigade Working Party was set up to oversee changes in the Fire Service, and to make recommendations for the future. The Working Party's reports contain much interesting information, including an analysis of activity at each station during 1972. For Malpas this showed a total of 54 turn-outs, comprising 45 within the station area (32 fires, 10 'special services', 3 false alarms), 3 calls to elsewhere in Cheshire, and 6 calls to outside the county. The Working Party also assessed the 1934 Malpas fire station building as "*outdated, too small and without drill facilities*" and recommended that a replacement station should be built during the period 1974-1977.

## **7. 1998 -THE PRESENT: CHESHIRE FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE**

Cheshire County Council Fire Service came to an end on 31 March 1998, exactly fifty years after it had taken over from the National Fire Service. It has been succeeded by the Cheshire Fire Authority, independent of the former County Council. One of the first projects of the new authority was to build the new Malpas fire station, which became operational in 2001(?).

It is a far cry from 1831, when the first Malpas fire engines came up the canal from London to Wheelock Wharf, to the efficient and well-equipped Brigade we have today! It is also a sign of how much Malpas values its local fire service that it has managed to survive, without any significant break, for those 169 years.

